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MarineMammals.be: improving marine mammal stranding data collection

The marine mammals website (www.marinemammals.be) is the result of a long-standing collaboration between the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS) and the University of Liège (ULg) and provides access to data from 50 years of marine mammal observations in Belgium. The site consists of two main parts, i.e. 'observations' and the Belgian Marine Mammal Biobank, a tissue bank (BMMB or just Biobank). While observations can be publicly consulted, the biobank is focused on scientific users. Overall, the website aids in collecting data on strandings, necropsies, ad hoc observations and dedicated surveys of any marine mammal (pinnipeds and cetaceans) occurring in Belgian waters. It allows to gather successive observations of any individual and to identify the probable causes of death of stranded animals and facilitates data flow to (international) reporting instances.

Ad hoc stranding and observational data are in a standardised way entered by RBINS staff. In order to support and refine the cause of death as assessed on the beach, necropsies and resulting samples are performed and recorded in the database as well. The system also keeps track of all the marine mammal tissue samples stored in the vaults of the Department of Morphology and Pathology of the ULg, which contain over 20000 samples. The target audience of the BMMB is a wide range of scientists: biologists, veterinarians, toxicologists, microbiologists, pathologists,... In the near future, those interested in lending out samples will be able to register on the site and browse through the available samples.

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